Catherine of Siena: An Anthology

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Introduction

Catherine's Life and Times

Caterina di Iacopo (or Giacomo) di Benincasa (Catherine of Siena) was born in the Tuscan city of Siena in 1347, the twenty-fourth of the twenty-five children of a wool-dyer and a poet's daughter, Lapa di Puccio Piagenti. She had no formal schooling and lived a mere thirty-three years; yet she became a significant force in late fourteenth-century Italian church and society, and now bears the titles of saint, patron of Italy, and Doctor of the Roman Catholic Church. She became a Dominican lay tertiary when she was about eighteen, and began to be active in political spheres when she was about twenty-seven.

A visionary experience when she was about six years old led Catherine to adopt a fierce if childish asceticism, and soon after to vow her virginity to God. As she grew into adolescence her determination never to marry kept pace with a regimen of fasting and physical discipline which increased in intensity until she became incapable of eating normally. The once vivacious and outgoing child now began to shun human company in favor of a spirituality wholly centered in union with God.

Repeated confrontations with her irascible mother over her strange behavior culminated in the latter's recruiting Catherine's favorite sister, Bonaventura, to persuade the girl to take better care of herself so that Lapa might arrange a good marriage. To please her sister, Catherine consented to attend more to her personal appearance and even to bleach her hair (as was the fad among young ladies of the day), a choice she would later lament as her most serious compromise of her commitment to God alone. Not long after that incident, Bonaventura died in childbirth, jolting the teenage Catherine into a new and radical conversion. On the advice of her Dominican cousin and confessor, Tommaso dalla Fonte, she cut off her hair as a signal to her mother that she was truly determined not to take a husband. In punishment she was forced to serve as the family's maid, deprived of any solitude that might encourage what her mother saw as her religious foolishness. Catherine's response was escape from what was to her an intrusion on her relationship with God by taking refuge in an inner fantasy world, her "little room within."

When she finally made clear to her parents that they could do nothing to convince her to marry, her father persuaded the family to relent. Catherine was

relieved of her household duties and given a tiny room of her own under the kitchen stairs, where she renewed all of her former austerities and retreated into ever more complete solitude and silence. The young lady who as a small girl had dreamed of running away in disguise to become a Dominican friar and preacher in some distant priory now began to dream instead of becoming a *Mantellata*, a member of the lay Third Order of Saint Dominic. The women tertiaries of Siena at the time, however, were all widows, and Lapa would not hear of her daughter joining such a group—until a deliberately self-inflicted scalding in the hot mineral springs of nearby Bagno Vignoni brought Catherine close to death.

Having won the habit, however, Catherine did not join the other *Mantellate* in their work among the poor and sick but continued her solitary way in her room under the stairs. Yet the honesty and openness of her prayer eventually, after about three years, led her to another dramatic conversion, one of those moments of inspiration and insight that so confront an individual with the truth of things that one is forever changed. Her disciples would later refer to it as her "mystical espousal" with Christ; for her it was, she suddenly realized, an espousal to a Christ who required her to be where he was, among the people. It was the great turning point of her life, the germ of a spirituality intrinsically centered in the indivisibility of love for God and active love for neighbor, a spirituality in which the interior "cell (or house) of self-knowledge" would be not an escape but a necessary complement to service. And so Catherine began to go out to those in need, timidly and tentatively at first, but driven by the uncompromising conviction of this truth that had confronted her and would brook no compromise.

Almost immediately Catherine began to attract the attention and friendship of religious people, including theologians and preachers of the great orders, with whom she conversed in an insatiable hunger for understanding. Primary were the Dominican friars whose Church of San Domenico was just up the hill from her home. One of these, her confessor Tommaso dalla Fonte, brought friend after friend to meet her, among them his fellow friars Bartolomeo Dominici and Tommaso di Antonio Caffarini. But there were also Franciscans and Augustinians, especially the hermits of nearby Lecceto. Of the latter, Giovanni Tantucci was one of those she would eventually ask to be responsible for her writings after her death and William Flete would become a dear friend and mentor.

Among her disciples were women and men, clerics, lay, and religious. Some were active in political and intellectual circles. Many were her seniors and superior to her in education and socioeconomic status. As for the poor, though she ministered generously to them, it would have been all but unthinkable for her as a member of the guild class to mix with them socially. (She in fact inherited many of her father's social values, including a distrust of peasants and of laborers who demanded wages rather than depend solely on the generosity of their employers.)

She found an ideal partner—intellectually, spiritually, and politically—in the Dominican Raimondo da Capua, who in spring 1374 was appointed by the

master of the Order of Preachers and the pope to be her confessor and the sole director of her public activities. Raimondo's instinct for ecclesiastical politics soon began to shape in substantial ways the orientation of Catherine's ministry. He was quick to appreciate the power of her word and presence as a woman acclaimed by many as holy. With him, and with the growing circle of disciples she loved to call her *famiglia*, her activity began to reach out beyond her native Siena to all that concerned the good of the universal Church. Her gift for conciliation had already been recognized close to home, and now, in collaboration with Raimondo, Catherine became deeply involved in attempts to mediate in the growing tensions between the republics of the Italian peninsula and the papacy then resident in Avignon. Because these tensions, though basically political, threatened the unity of the Church, they represented for Catherine a religious crisis in which she felt compelled repeatedly to intervene. By 1375 she had begun passionately to promote Gregory XI's projected crusade against the Turks, convinced that such a venture would not only unite the rebellious republics with the pope in a common defense of Christian lands but would also bring converted Muslims into the Church as a leaven for needed reform—and lead to her own much desired martyrdom, since she assumed she would herself join the crusade and be killed. Her efforts took her to Pisa, Lucca, Florence, and eventually to Avignon, where in 1376 she overcame the hesitancy of Gregory XI to return with his curia to Rome.

After Gregory's death on 27 March 1378, a tumultuous election brought to the papal throne Urban VI, whose heavy-handed ways soon caused the majority of the cardinals to disavow him and elect an antipope, Clement VII, thus triggering the Great Western Schism. Catherine, however, vehemently supported Urban's legitimacy, even while urging the ambitious and violently autocratic pope to moderation. At his invitation she moved with a number of her disciples to Rome in November of 1378, hoping to salvage the unity of her beloved Church. By this time her health was failing under the combination of psychological stress and the effects of her past ascetical extremes. Though she had already for several years embraced a far healthier balance and perspective in the latter and had made repeated efforts to eat more normally, she had been unable to overcome her inedia. And the apparent failure of her dearest exertions became a crushing weight which she felt even physically. Still she continued to preach and write, pray and fast in defense of the Church's unity until she was totally disabled early in 1380.[1] She died on 29 April of that year.

[1] A number of contemporary sources actually refer to Catherine's public speaking as "preaching."

Catherine as Thinker and Writer

Catherine of Siena was the first woman to have authored and to have had her work disseminated in any of the Tuscan dialects. She brought to the task her own unique style and power, bending a truly modest vocabulary to serve both her moods and her message more than adequately.

Though unschooled in any formal sense, she had learned to read during her years of solitude, and surely read not only whatever biblical and liturgical texts were accessible to her (which of course were in Latin) but also the vernacular works of at least some of the popular religious writers of the day, especially those of her fellow Dominican Domenico Cavalca. Her mind was and would always remain an integrating mind, absorbing insights from every possible source but remolding them into her own patterns, interrelationships, and images.

If we take the sources at their word, Catherine learned to write, though probably in an elementary way, while on a preaching mission in the Orcia valley in 1377. In early October she wrote to Raimondo da Capua, then in Rome, describing an apparently dream-like experience:

> *This letter and another I sent you I've written with my own hand on the Isola della Rocca,*[2] with so many sighs and tears that I couldn't see even when I was seeing. But I was filled with wonder at myself and God's goodness when I thought of his mercy toward his human creatures and his overflowing providence toward me. He provided for my refreshment by giving me the ability to write—a consolation I've never known because of my ignorance—so that when I come down from the heights I might have a little something to vent my heart, lest it burst. Because he didn't want to take me yet from this dark life, he fixed it in my mind in a marvelous manner, the way a teacher does when he gives his pupil a model. Shortly after you left me, I began to learn in my sleep, with the glorious evangelist John and Thomas Aquinas.[3] Forgive me for writing so much, but my hands and tongue run along with my heart.[4]

[2] The Salimbeni fortress where Catherine was a guest. A modern resident of the town and guide at the fortress (now a historic monument) says that it is called the Isola, or "island," because its top levels are so often above the haze that rises from the valley below, like an island in a sea of clouds.

[3] Fawtier (*Sainte Catherine de Sienne: Essaie de critique des sources, les oeuvres de Sainte Catherine de Sienne*, Paris: De Boccard, 1930), Alvaro Grion (*Dottrina e Fonti*, Brescia: Morcelliana, 1953), and J. Hurtaud (*Dialogue de Sainte Catherine de Sienne*, Paris: Lethellieux, 1931) were not convinced of the authenticity of this postscript. Eugenio Dupré Theseider (*"Sono autentiche le Lettere di S. Caterina?" Vita cristiana* 12, 1940, pp. 212–224) accepts it as authentic, as do I.

[4] Letter T272.

Still, no document in Catherine's own hand has been discovered. Instead she used various individuals as her scribes. Their role becomes a critical question in relation to Catherine's authorship, since it is only through their mediation that we have Catherine's works. Though she certainly read and even edited her *Dialogue*, there is no reason to suppose that Catherine ever looked at her letters once she had dictated them or that she saw the transcriptions of her prayers at all.

Linguistic analysis of Catherine's writings indicates that, other than very minor details of grammar and orthography, the language and the ideas are Catherine's. Beyond the evidence it provides of Catherine's authorship, this analysis and the establishment of even a relative chronology of all of her works has opened up new potential for analyzing the evolution of her thought and expression over the brief period in which she wrote.[5] It is very clear that her thought ran in patterns—that many expressions, images, and themes were used for a time, then dropped, perhaps to reappear later. The linguistic evidence also demonstrates that though Catherine borrowed very freely from other authors, once she had borrowed she continued to develop the idea in her own fashion and integrate it seamlessly with her own thought.

Nothing in the sources would indicate that Catherine herself initially had any intention of actually collecting or disseminating her writings other than *The Dialogue*. She may, however, have been aware that some of her disciples were keeping copies of her letters and prayers when in her final letter to Raimondo da Capua (T373) she asked him and a few others to do with "the book" (*The Dialogue*) and with "whatever other writings of mine you may find, whatever seems to you to be most to God's honor."

The Letters

As Catherine's concern began to be touched by the real needs of real people, she found a widening range of women and men looking to her for spiritual counsel. She responded out of a wisdom uncannily profound in so young a woman. Sometime around 1370 she began to use letter-writing as one of her favored means of reaching out, advising, and influencing others in favor of her causes—possibly in a conscious modeling of herself upon Paul the Apostle, who was particularly dear to her. Approximately 385 of these letters (most of them spread from 1374 until her death in 1380) have been discovered and published to date, addressed to a remarkably wide variety of her contemporaries—popes, cardinals and bishops, royalty and public officials, family and friends and disciples, and an assortment of others, including allies and opponents, a mercenary captain, a

[5] This analysis is described in detail in the introduction to my edition of *The Letters of Catherine of Siena*, Volume I (Tempe: ACMRS, 2000). The complete edition of four volumes has now been published by ACMRS.

prostitute, a homosexual, and political prisoners.[6] She wrote, it seems, to anyone she thought she might influence, whether for their personal good or that of the larger Church. Her purpose, however, was always deeper than the merely social or informational, as she was interested primarily in the eternal dimension of personal lives and societal affairs. Unfortunately, the early compilers' purposes of edification and sometimes perhaps also reasons of confidentiality led them to delete much of the personal content from the letters; but even so abridged they provide a window onto Catherine's evolving thought and personality and onto the history and culture of her age.

The letters bear a particular added interest because her activity extended so far beyond the normal feminine bounds of her time and her status in church and society. Although she shared in many ways the stereotypical sexist attitudes of the age, Catherine in actuality moved far beyond the ordinary sphere of womankind in her world. She wrote with wonted deference and even insistence about priestly and hierarchical prerogatives, but she confronted the human embodiments of those prerogatives with a startling boldness where she perceived abuse, and strode with the spontaneity and unselfconsciousness of conviction into pastoral areas most would have regarded as a strictly clerical preserve. She used the word *virile* ("manly") to describe an ideal Christian disposition (often telling women as well as men to be "manly" and not "effeminate"), yet herself gave the example in her thoroughly feminine way of the sort of courage she had in mind.

The Dialogue

While Catherine's letters are the better window onto her personality, growth, and relationships with others, *The Dialogue* is her crowning work, her bequest of all her teaching to her followers. She called it simply "the book."

Certain twists in the path by which the tradition has come into English have ended in a rather common belief that Catherine dictated *The Dialogue* entirely in the space of a single five-day ecstasy.[7] The total composite of references to the work by Catherine herself and a number of her contemporaries, however, makes it clear that a much longer time was involved, about eleven months. Raimondo da Capua sets the beginning and immediate motive of the work in a particularly significant mystical experience. "About two years before her death," he writes, "such a clarity of truth was revealed to her from heaven that Catherine was constrained to spread it abroad by means of writing, asking her scribes to stand ready to take down whatever came from her mouth as soon as they noticed that she had gone into ecstasy."[8] The experience referred to is without a doubt the one Catherine elaborates in her long letter to Raimondo (T272), written from Rocca d'Orcia in early October 1377, the letter that was to serve as the framework and basic content of her book. She tells of having offered four petitions to God (for the reform of the Church, for the whole world, for Raimondo's spiritual welfare, and for a certain unnamed sinner), to each of which, in her ecstasy, God had responded with specific teachings. Catherine began the work then and there, while still at the Salimbeni fortress. The book must have taken some shape by the time she left on her second peacemaking mission to Florence, for in May or June of 1378 she wrote to Stefano Maconi back in Siena (T365) that she had left her book with the countess Benedetta de' Salimbeni at the fortress, and he should have the countess send it at once. Almost certainly she spent some time on the manuscript during the following tumultuous months in Florence. She left it behind at her quick departure, and on her return to Siena wrote to her Florentine host, Francesco di Pipino, "Give the book to Francesco [Malavolti] . . . for I want to write in it."[9] And Raimondo records that she did indeed "attend more diligently" to the writing of her book at that point.[10]

The book was in a form Catherine considered finished before the schism had fully erupted, and before she was called to Rome in November of 1378.[11] The testimony of Catherine's contemporaries is unanimous that the book involved a great deal of dictation on her part, sometimes while she was in ecstasy.[12] Yet the style of *The Dialogue* betrays not only such ecstatic dictation, but also a great deal of painstaking and sometimes awkward expanding and drawing in of passages written earlier. There is every reason to believe that Catherine herself did this editing. First of all, it is not an editing in the direction of more polished style, which it probably would have been had it been the work of any of her scribes. And if Raimondo's attitude is typical, the latter considered the saint's writings too sacred to tamper with.[13] Furthermore, besides referring to Catherine's setting her book in order, Caffarini records having been told by Stefano Maconi

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[6] The total number of letters depends on how one counts the duplicates or close duplicates sent to more than one addressee or group of addressees, as well as one letter (T371) included in some manuscripts and editions as a separate letter to Urban VI but considered by others to be a continuation of T373 to Raimondo da Capua. (The prefix "T" indicates the numbering of the letters developed by Tommasèo.)

[7] Cf. especially J. Hurtaud in the Introduction to his French translation of the *Dialogue* (Paris: Lethellieux, 1931) and Johannes Jorgensen, *Saint Catherine of Siena* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1939), p. 311. The latter, however, takes a broader view in his note 8, p. 428.

[8] Raimondo da Capua, *Life*, III, iii.

[9] Addendum to Letter T179, published by Robert Fawtier in *Mélanges d'archéologie et d'histoire* 34 (1914): 7.

[10] Raimondo da Capua, *Life*, III, i.

[11] Raimondo da Capua, *Life*, III, i.

[12] Raimondo da Capua, *Life*, III, i; Cristofano di Gano Guidini, *Memorie*, ed. Milanesi, p. 37; testimonies of Stefano Maconi, Francesco Malavolti, and Bartolomeo Dominici in *Processo Castellano*, cited in Grion, *Santa Caterina*, p. 315; Caffarini, *Libellus de Supplemento*, III, vi, 6.

[13] Raimondo da Capua, *Life*, III, iii.

that the latter had seen Catherine writing with her own hand "several pages of the book which she herself composed in her own dialect."[14]

The Dialogue remains the most comprehensive summation of Catherine's thought in a single work.

The Prayers

The principles Catherine emphasized in her teaching found constant expression in her prayer: knowledge of God as loving redeemer and of herself as loved sinner, the centrality of truth and love, the primacy of desire, the call to enter fully into the redemptive mission of Christ by laying one's own life on the line for others.

As deeply as Catherine plunged into meditation on the mysteries of faith, just so intimately did she keep touch with her daily preoccupations. Almost invariably we find her prayer returning to the specific needs of the Church and of those she has "been given to love with a special love." She holds these before God with a frankness and warmth that indicate well the nature of her relations with these persons and institutions in her actual converse with them.

A good number of Catherine's spoken prayers, though surely not nearly all of them, were preserved for us by her scribes—some within the context of dictated letters (for she would burst into prayer while dictating as readily as she would during a conversation); some within her book, *The Dialogue*; some (whether from memory or from actual notes) incorporated into the narratives of her life; and some finally which were taken down, with or without her knowledge, as she prayed in ecstasy, and which eventually became part of a specific collection. The twenty-six prayers of this "canon" are all from the last four years of Catherine's life, most of them from her final seventeen months. They therefore, along with her letters of that same period, express Catherine's spirituality at its most mature.

Catherine's Spirituality and Theology

Although laced with marvelously effective and largely original imagery, Catherine's writings display a style not poetic but oratorical—the style, really, of the preacher she had wanted even from childhood to be. She rambles easily and because of the abundance of her parentheses often loses track of sentences begun; yet her reasoning is knit with a tightness that defies a search for inconsistency or incoherence. It is this extraordinary consistency, besides her depth of pastoral understanding, that marks Catherine's writings from a theological point of view. Not that she developed or ever tried to develop anything like a "systematic" theology, even in her *Dialogue*; her concerns were mystical and pastoral. In her letters she shared with individual persons, in remarkably individual tones, the amazing synthesis of her own thought and living. She had a genius for applying

[14] *Libellus de Supplemento* I, i, 9.

theological and dogmatic abstractions to the everyday issues of very real people, from popes to very ordinary women and men. Hers is a common-sense yet uncompromising spirituality, maternal in a way that seems never to have alienated even persons much older than she—except those who found her whole bearing intolerable, and they were not a few! Hers is a mysticism not at all dominated by physical and psychological phenomena but centered explicitly in the conviction that the quest for God is inseparable from active love for the world. Even the extreme asceticism that had so characterized her early life and ravaged her health eventually came into perspective, until she saw it as a mere instrument of discipline, wholly subject to the demands of love and service.

The theological thought behind her practicality evidences the strains of influence in her life: strong Augustinian and scholastic patterns through the Dominican tradition and her Augustinian mentors; bits of Gregory the Great, whom she regarded as a model for popes; echoes of contemporaries and near contemporaries whose works were the favorites of so many preachers of the day: Jacopo da Vorazze, Domenico Cavalca, Iacopone da Todi, Jacopo Passavanti, Giovanni Colombini. Still, she seldom directly quoted these authors in support of her position. Rather she had so absorbed their thoughts and words into hers that they were, as it were, simply part of her vocabulary, totally at the service of her own synthesis. So too with the scriptures of both testaments. Her exposure was probably limited to what she heard in the liturgical readings and in sermons and conversations. Direct biblical citations are relatively rare in her works, yet the scriptures so permeated her expression that the underlying passages are easy to discern. She was especially and obviously Pauline and Johannine in her thinking and imaging.

The great themes of her *Dialogue* and *Prayers* were already taking shape in her letters during the early years of her public life: the centrality and inseparability of truth and love; the human person as image of the divine Trinity; Jesus the Christ as redeemer and way; the unity of love for God and love for neighbor; the twofold knowledge of God and of self; the Church as continuation of Christ's life on earth; the mystery of providence. She did not break any really new theological ground; yet she developed a synthesis compelling enough to win for her the distinction of being declared (in 1970) Doctor of the Roman Catholic Church—a title she and Teresa of Avila were simultaneously the first women to bear.

Catherine's Influence

As one follows Catherine's correspondence one sees her growing involvement with familial and ecclesial relationships, with the crusade movement, the return of the papacy to Rome, the reform of the Church, and the hoped-for reunion of that Church when the Great Western Schism sapped its vitality and her own final energies. Though she approached issues not primarily for political ends but as

one deeply concerned for the moral and ecclesial values at stake, Catherine was at the vortex of some of the most crucial events of the late fourteenth century, and was closely connected with many who were intimately involved with the civil and ecclesiastical politics of those events. The several republics of what is now Italy were just beginning to feel the muscle of their independence, and in the process were in an especially tense relationship with the political and economic power of the papacy. The issues at the heart of the conflict were indeed complex, in some respects beyond Catherine's comprehension. But she was acutely conscious that the Church's unity was in jeopardy, and that neither side had a monopoly on either right or wrong. She experienced repeated frustration and failure because of her lack of political sophistication. But her single-minded determination where religious values were in question kept her doggedly on the heels of every critical development, whether by letter or by actual journeys to the scenes of tension. It is questionable whether at any juncture other than the return of Gregory XI to Rome she actually influenced the ultimate turn of events—though some were of the opinion that in convincing Gregory to leave Avignon she was responsible for the schism that followed. Yet wherever events touched on the spiritual integrity of the Church, there was Catherine, and her presence could not be ignored.

The spread of her influence was rapid and wide, even during her lifetime, but even more so after her death. She was read and emulated by the pious, canonized by her Church, extolled by homilists and poets, painted and sculpted by artists, and discussed, interpreted, and argued over by theologians. And the renewed popularity of her writings in recent decades attests to her relevance and influence even today.

The Texts In This Anthology

This anthology attempts as comprehensive as possible a presentation of Catherine's thought, gleaned from all of her extant writings. The book comprises three parts.

In Part One, Catherine's theological thought is presented through texts arranged within an outline devised from my intuition of Catherine's "logic." While one will find in the ordering of topics some echoes of classic scholastic or modern systematic theology, in a good number of cases Catherine's interpretations seemed to demand a placement different from what might be expected in view of, for example, the outline of Aquinas' *Summa Theologica* or of current systematic insights.

Catherine's writings are so rich in images that it seemed worthwhile to present these on their own, even with the necessary repetition of some texts cited in Part One. Part Two, therefore, gathers texts illustrating this imagery. Because many of Catherine's specific images are interlaced in such complex relationships, specific images are often brought together under common headings. And because nearly every image leads the reader somehow to nearly every other image, the sequence is necessarily somewhat arbitrary even though I have attempted to place closely related groups of images in proximity to each other.

Catherine also addressed a number of issues specific to her time and place. Texts representing her thought on these issues are gathered in Part Three.

Under each topic and sub-topic, texts are presented in chronological order, so that the reader may see the development of Catherine's thought over the near decade during which she wrote. (Texts from *The Dialogue* are consistently placed in early November 1378, when the entire work was actually completed, even though it is possible to establish when various parts of the book were in fact basically composed, some as early as autumn of 1377.)

Certainly not every relevant text is cited under any given topic. Among the texts selected, there is inevitable overlap and repetition, but in general each text has been chosen because it presents some new nuance of the theme in question. The reader would therefore be well advised to consult the indices of the complete texts of Catherine's works if a more comprehensive interpretation is being pursued.

The texts cited are all taken from my published translations:

The Dialogue of Catherine of Siena (New York: Paulist, 1980);

The Letters of Catherine of Siena (4 volumes, Tempe: Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 2000, 2001, 2007, 2008);[15]

The Prayers of Catherine of Siena, 2nd edition (San Jose: Authors Choice Press, 2001).

However, for the purposes of the anthology,

- the titles of letters have been abbreviated, giving only the Tommasèo number (or, where this is lacking, the number of its first edited form), and generally omitting the addressees' titles as well as the place to which the letter is addressed;

- paragraph breaks have sometimes been omitted;

- nouns have sometimes been supplied for pronouns (without square brackets when obvious) to make their antecedents explicit or to bring consistency to the text;

[15] When the letters are cited, their numbers are usually preceded by "T," representing the most commonly used numeration, that of Niccolò Tommasèo. Some letters, however, were discovered and edited more recently, and are numbered according to their respective editors: "DT" for Eugenio Dupré Theseider, "Gardner" for Edmund Gardner, and "Fawtier" for Robert Fawtier.